

THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING
OF THE RESOURCES SCRUTINY COMMITTEE
HELD ON WEDNESDAY 19 APRIL 2006

Present: Councillor A Burnip (Chair)
Councillors D Armstrong, B Burn,
A Collinson, Mrs S Mason, C Patching,
M Routledge, R Taylor and P G Ward

Also present: Councillor D Myers - Executive Member for e-government
and Scrutiny Liaison

1. **THE MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING** held on 30 March 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were confirmed.
2. **THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE EXECUTIVE** held on 4 April 2006, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member, were submitted.

RESOLVED that the information contained within the Minutes, be noted.

3. **PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER SESSION**

There were no members of the public present.

4. **PROCUREMENT CODE OF PRACTICE**

Consideration was given to the joint report of the Corporate Procurement Manager and Monitoring Officer, a copy of which had been circulated to each Member and was considered by the Executive on 4th April, 2006.

Members were advised that the Code of Practice had been prepared following wide consultation which included, the Audit Commission, the 4P's, the Council's Corporate Procurement Working Group and Scrutiny Management Board. The Procurement Code of Practice had been developed to ensure that the Council took a uniform approach to procurement activities.

Councillor P Ward referred to the financial limits stipulated in the Code and queried what they were based on. P Faill advised that the figures were historic and had been set following guidance from Central Government. T Bell advised that in monetary terms the financial limits had increased very little and in the main were an inflationary rise. The purpose of the limits was to make the procurement process as flexible as possible and prevent the waiving of Standing Orders which could be restrictive. The flexibility would allow Officers to take advantage of the market where necessary.

Councillor D Armstrong queried how the Authority compared with neighbouring authorities. P Faill advised that the District of Easington intended to use the Procurement Code of Practice as a model to help other authorities that had not progressed as quickly.

The Chair queried the section related to land transactions and the new powers to dispose of land at less than its highest value in certain circumstances.

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T Bell advised that there were situations where the Authority may accept a quotation that was lower in value than the highest tender depending on the individual circumstances. The Authority would consider a range of issues and not just the highest tender in terms of monetary gain i.e. a social housing landlord may wish to purchase land at lower than its market value for the provision of social housing. Under these circumstances a tender lower than the highest may be accepted. However, each situation would be considered on its own merits. Councillor B Burn queried if this applied to residents in the district who wished to purchase land adjacent to their homes ie. to extend their garden.

T Bell advised that this depended on the circumstances but usually where a resident applied to the Council to purchase land adjacent to their property it would not involve a tendering process and the land would be valued and sold at full market value.

Councillor C Patching made reference to the delegation to the Chief Executive and Directors to determine whether to seek quotations on schemes up to £20,000. He was concerned that the Authority would be unable to maintain consistency on decisions and good governance across the Authority would be lost. T Bell advised that the delegation to the Chief Executive and Directors would allow the Authority to take advantage of the market and act quickly to acquire goods and services where necessary. Internal Audit would also monitor the various areas around purchasing as part of their annual work programme. Councillor D Myers advised that the newly established Audit Committee would be involved in monitoring the delegation to the Chief Executive and Directors.

Councillor M Routledge congratulated Officers on the excellent report and suggested that an update report be provided to the Resources Scrutiny Committee in six months, particularly in relation to the delegation to the Chief Executive and Directors. The Chair advised that Councillor P Ward was a Member of the Corporate Procurement Working Party and would also be able to provide feedback.

S Gwilym, Scrutiny Support Manager, advised that the Procurement Code of Practice, together with any amendments to the Council's Constitution would be submitted to Full Council for adoption.

The Chair thanked P Fail, T Bell and D Taylor for their attendance at the meeting.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted and a further report be considered in six months.

5. **COMMUNICATION AND PUBLICITY**

There were no items to report.

6. ADDITIONAL URGENT ITEMS OF BUSINESS

In accordance with the Local Government Act, 1972, as amended by the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985, Section 100B(4)(b) the Chair, following consultation with the Proper Officer, agreed that the following items of business, not shown on the Agenda, be considered as a matter of urgency.

7 HOTEL FEASIBILITY STUDY (AOB)

Councillor A Collinson advised that the Executive had previously allocated £10,000 to appoint consultants to undertake a feasibility study on the provision of a hotel within the district and requested an update.

RESOLVED that S James, Principal Economic Development Manager, be requested to attend a future meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee to discuss the feasibility study.

8 WEBSITE/CUSTOMER SERVICES (AOB)

Councillor A Burnip requested information in relation to the number of customers accessing the Council's website and Customer Services.

Councillor D. Myers advised that figures related to the number of hits the Council's website had received and the number of calls made to Customer Services could be provided at a future meeting.

RESOLVED that Mr B Nicholson, Head of e-government and Information Services, be requested to attend a future meeting of the Resources Scrutiny Committee.

9 COMMUNICATIONS (AOB)

Councillor D. Armstrong raised concerns regarding the Authority's new telephone system and the problems customers had experienced in getting through to the Authority. Councillor D Myers advised that there had been some teething problems with the new system which had been compounded by the volume of calls associated with the annual issue of Council Tax bills, the distribution of concessionary bus passes and East Durham Homes move from the Council complex. Members were advised that the Authority were aware of the problems which were currently being investigated.

S Gwilym, Scrutiny Support Manager, advised that the telephone system was discussed at the last meeting of the Service Delivery Scrutiny Committee where it was explained that with the old switchboard when all lines were busy members of the public would receive an engaged tone. The new system asked callers to wait in a queue, which could result in them hanging on the line for a considerable length of time. The Head of Customer Services was currently collating statistics which would categorise the type of calls received by the Authority i.e. aborted calls, length of calls, how long people had to hold etc.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.

10 **CONCESSIONARY BUS FARES SCHEME - PUBLICITY (AOB)**

Councillor P Ward referred to the introduction of the Concessionary Bus Fares Scheme and felt that more should have been done to publicise the part the Authority had played in the Schemes introduction.

T Bell advised that publicity in relation to the scheme was discussed at the Executive held on 4 April 2006 where it was explained that the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive were meeting the Communications and Marketing Manager to maximise publicity for the Scheme.

RESOLVED that the information given, be noted.